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ABSTRACT

Assertive training is offered as an effective method for parents of exceptional children to attain their legitimate rights regarding their children's education. A mother of a retarded child recounts her experiences and frustrations in participating in her child's EPPC (Educational Planning and Placement Committee). Some rights of parents (such as the right to attempt to plan the best program for the child) are reviewed, and assertive training is described in relation to affirmation and implementation of rights. Also provided are examples which illustrate the differences between nonassertive, aggressive, and assertive responses that might be made during interactions between parents and school personnel. Offered are brief sections on teachers as models and resources for parents; positive and assertive physical and verbal behaviors of parents and teachers during conferences; and pointers for parents on working with the school to get the best education for the child. (SB)

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The Council for Exceptional Children

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"Assertive Training for Parents of Exceptional Children"

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A Case Study

I am the parent of four children, the youngest of whom is retarded and brain damaged. Like many parents, I wear two hats in relationship to the public schools of our city, one as a professional educator, one as a parent whose children are in the school system. Actually, I wear three hats: parent of three normal children, parent of a retarded child (and believe me, these two hats are very different), and professional. Many of you are parents with children currently in the school systems of your city and many of you are also professionals. As you read this, I would like you to wear your parent hat most of the time, and if you don't have it, try to remember what it looks like. If you are also the parent of a handicapped child, as I am, you will know what I am about to say is common experience, and all too true. In Michigan under our Mandatory Act, EPPC's must be set up for each handicapped child. This EPPC (Educational Planning and Placement Committee) must include the parent of the child under discussion. Mandatory ensures many other parental rights and is hailed as a giant step forward in this regard. But, do you know that when I go to my own

EPPC for my own daughter, I make sure to take along a friend? I have as much or more education as the professionals attending the meeting. I am middle class like they are, and white, and certainly know my way around the public school system, since I have been a resident of the city for 27 years. But I feel cowed when I go to the EPPC. I often feel that what I am being given is charity, not my right, but something someone is granting me out of the goodness of their heart. I feel guilty because my child is sometimes very disturbing in school, and I feel that I am a bad parent. In turn, I get angry, defensive, apologetic, aggressive, nervous. I don't mean to say that the professionals have caused these feelings in me. Some negative feelings I certainly bring along with me, either from past encounters with professionals, or from that remnant of guilt that all parents of handicapped children feel. We always worry: have we done enough for that child, have we shortchanged our other children? Let me give you an example of what happens to me as a parent. When my oldest son was in kindergarten, and I went for parent-teacher conference, I was so pleased to go, I was excited, I dressed well, I was really happily anticipating that conference. Indeed, the teacher told me: your son is brilliant, he's kind, he's warm, it is a pleasure to meet you, you must be a marvelous parent. That's almost a direct quote from the conference with my son's teacher. However, on the other hand, when my daughter Susanna, the retarded child, was five, and in kindergarten, I was nervous and tense before I went to the conference.

Indeed, at the conference I was told: "your daughter can't stay in kindergarten, maybe she could attend for just an hour a day", "what, you don't agree with that?" "Are you just trying to get rid of her?" I felt guilty, angry, defensive, as if I was a poor parent. How could both those things have occurred to me, did I really switch from being a model parent, to a poor parent? Is there something that professionals are saying, inadvertantly, to parents of handicapped children: that they indeed possess less value? My experiences are echoed by those of other parents. Under mandatory, parents are to participate in the educational planning for their child. But how do EPPC's really work? Mandatory calls for at least three professionals to attend the EPPC for each child: a member of the diagnostic staff, a member of the administrative staff, and a member of the teaching staff. Often there are as many as seven to ten professionals at an EPPC--and one parent. Can we really expect that parent to participate fully in the planning, and, if disagreement arises, not act aggressively or defensively? We know that the parent has brought with him a history of interaction with the schools, and a history of their own problems with their child. Can we really expect the right program for the child to emerge under these circumstances? Is there some way we can help the parents overcome their anxiety, become well informed, act assertively, and subsequently feel successful in helping plan for their child?

An overview of some legitimate rights of parents and a discussion of an effective method for attaining these rights will be a beginning.

Some Rights of Parents

It is critical for parents to have a clear belief system or view of their rights prior to having school conferences. Identifying rights will help the parent during meetings since it will provide support and justify a firm, consistent stand for what they feel is best for their child.

The following identifies some basic rights of parents:

-The Right to have prescribed procedures followed as outlined in legislative or school manuals.

-The Right to know about available services or facilities.

-The Right to attempt to plan the best program for your child.

-The Right to ask for explanations from professionals.

-The Right to play the role of parent and child advocate and not to view things as an administrator or teacher.

-The Right to be treated as a capable human adult and not be patronized.

-The Right to use one's judgment to help decide the priorities and schedules.

-The Right to refuse inappropriate requests or pressures without feeling guilty, selfish or ignorant.

-The Right to have one's opinions given the same respect and consideration that others are given.

Assertive Training

Assertive training is a facilitation of a set of social skills improving an individual's appropriate expression of personal feelings, maintenance of personal rights, and meeting of personal needs.

Assertive training, though it has existed since the late forties as part of behavior therapy (Salter, 1949), has recently begun receiving increased attention, partly in response to human growth and self-actualization, change in sex role expectancies and increased visibility of the women's movement. Assertive training is based on the theory that social behavior is learned behavior. Since social behavior is learned, it can be unlearned and replaced by more appropriate and satisfying behavior (Wolpe, 1958, 1969); Wolpe and Lazarus, 1966). Therefore, if an individual has learned a set of responses for a certain situation or group of situations and is unsatisfied with the results which these behaviors produce, other behaviors which would be more satisfying or rewarding to the individual may be learned.

Skill training in assertion identifies a definite set of interpersonal behaviors which are defined through a systematic instructional program and refined by the participant throughout the process of learning. A systematic assertive training approach focuses on assisting participants to identify interpersonal rights, to develop and practice assertive behaviors, to be aware of emotional anxieties which inhibit acting assertively, and to decrease the

emotional anxiety through active practice exercises (Jakubowski-Spector, 1973). Through systematic assertive training, individual participants become more sensitized to their individual behavior styles in dealing with person-to-person communications.

Assertive behavior is that type of interpersonal behavior in which an individual actively communicates his/her personal rights without violating the rights of others. Assertive behavior is a direct, honest, and appropriate expression of one's feelings, opinions, and beliefs (Alberti and Emmons, 1970; Lazarus, 1971).

Other skills are involved in the assertive behavior for example, skills in confrontation (indicating discrepancies in another's behavior or communication), skills in empathy (indicating respect and consideration not deference for another person), skills in persuasion (asserting an opinion with respect to another's opinion). Appropriate assertive behavior enhances self-esteem and accomplishes the individual's goals.

Nonassertive behavior is that type of interpersonal behavior which enables an individual's rights to be violated in one of two ways: (a) an individual ignores his/her personal rights; (b) others are allowed to infringe on an individual's personal rights. The individual in denying and inhibiting self from expressing actual preferences, experiences behavior which results in hurt and anxious feelings. In allowing others to violate one's rights,

desired goals are seldom achieved.

Aggressive behavior is that type of interpersonal behavior in which an individual expresses his/her rights without consideration for the rights of others. The violation of the rights of others results in domination and humiliation. Although goals may be perceived as achieved, hatred and frustration are generated as end results.

It is important that assertion and aggression be clearly differentiated because it is not the goal of assertive training to promote destructive, aggressive behavior. Rather, assertive training focuses upon individual personal effectiveness in interpersonal communication. Once an individual makes the choice to act assertively and has received reinforcement for assertive behavior, irrational fears are reduced and the individual grows in self-worth, self-assurance, and self-esteem.

Parent Rights and Assertive Training

The society has often placed the parent in a no-win situation. On the one hand, schools reward quiet, passive, and accepting behaviors of parents. On the other hand, if parents are very passive, accepting, or uninvolved, they are labeled neglectful--if they are too involved or pushy they are labeled hostile and aggressive.

On a continuum of involvement the norm or set of behaviors that is most frequently rewarded is the quiet,

passive, and accepting parent. At conferences this type of parent nods a lot, asks few questions, and is nice. On the one extreme we find parents who are so passive, unskilled, or uninvolved, that they are punished by being called neglectful or bad parents--and on the other extreme, parents who are so involved or "pushy" that they are labeled hostile or troublemakers.

There is a rightful place for a parent who is knowledgeable, involved, and stands up for rights?

With the advent of mandatory legislation, mainstreaming concepts, multi-plurity of school problems and low budgets this situation can not continue. A hierarchy of power that often functions during conferences; from the physician, psychologist, administrator, teacher to the last participant, the parent--precludes reaching the ultimate goal--effective information sharing, decision making, program planning and follow-up.

The schools work for and are supported by the parents. As consumers they have legitimate rights and, more importantly, are critical as team members at conferences. Mutual responsibility and respect will help attain long-term positive educational gains.

School systems like other systems often attempt to maintain the status quo. At this point it is the parents who must impose themselves forcefully at first to make the system respond. The first steps, legislation and litigation, have been made. The next step is for parents

to acknowledge and affirm their rights.

Assertive training for parents of exceptional children can provide critical training in skills necessary for this affirmation and implementation of rights. It can support the attempt for open, honest, and more effective communication during school conferences.

Examples of Assertive Responses

The following situations are provided to illustrate the differences between nonassertive, aggressive, and assertive responses that might be made during interactions between parents and school personnel.

Example 1: Background: The parent has made a request of the principal.
Principals Statement: "I wish you could see it from my point of view. We have 15 other students in that class and your child is just one of them."
Problem/Right: The parent is being asked to play a role other than parent - i.e., administrator, teacher.
Parent's Response: Non Assertive Response: "I guess if I was doing a better job at home this wouldn't happen."
Aggressive Response: "If you were more efficient, you'd have more time for Johnny's special needs."
Assertive Response: "My role is that of a parent, not of an administrator or principal. My main concern is my child. Your's is management of the class."

Example 2: Background: A psychologist is talking to the parent at an evaluation and placement conference.

Psychologist Statement: "I have reviewed John's tests and he is mentally defective."

Problem and/or Right: The parent has the right to ask for an explanation.

Parents Response: Non Assertive Response: "Oh my God" - Parent cries and runs out.

Aggressive Response: "How dare you call my child defective."

Assertive Response: "Isn't there something in the law that says that you're supposed to explain tests and what they mean?"

Example 3: Background: The teacher is responding to a request made by the parent during a conference.

Teacher Statement: "Now Mrs. Burton, you're being too emotional. Most parents feel this way. You're so involved with your own child that you can't make the best judgement for him."

Problem and/or Right: The parent is being stereotyped and not dealt with as an individual. The parent has the right to be treated as a capable adult, and not be patronized.

Parent's Response: Non Assertive Response: "Well, I guess you're right."

Aggressive Response: "You're lazy and just want to get him out of your class."

Assertive Response: "I feel that I have legitimate concerns about my child and this program. I hope you will listen to my concerns as this child's mother, not an "an emotional parent"."

In these examples, the non-assertive responses show parents accepting the school's view or blaming themselves for the situation. The reactions foster guilt, anxiety, and often avoidance or aggression at a later date. The aggressive responses blame the school personnel for the problem or "tells them off". This usually fosters more hostility and a cycle of negative interactions. Neither type of response is apt to foster a continued positive team approach to a problem. The problem and the child are often lost in such interactions.

The assertive response attempts to focus on a clarification of a law or role or a description of a feeling in an objective way. This is a non-confronting, non-blaming description which centers on communicating information in a way it can be accepted. It is a more business-like response in that it indicates control and task orientation. Assertive responses are an attempt to continue discussion of viable alternatives rather than closing discussions with name calling, emotional outbursts, or accepting plans that the parents do not understand or like.

It is not easy to become more assertive. It takes concentration, practice, and at some time, failure. In addition, it involves teachers as well as parents.

Some Tasks for Teachers

To a large extent teachers act as models and resources for the parent. They need to be informed about federal or state laws, and local options regarding handicapped children. Teachers should be aware of community resources so that they can give the parents advice on additional services or facilities needed by a child. Teachers will have to constantly reassure some parents that public education of a handicapped child is a right and not a charity. Parents should not have to feel grateful for service nor should they fear that services might be withheld because they differ in opinion or ask questions. Teachers and administrators are facilitators for parents in the process of setting priorities and making educational decisions. The teacher can be an asset at conferences for parents and support assertive behaviors.

Positive and Assertive Behaviors During Conferences

Practically there are ways that parents and teachers can foster positive and assertive behaviors during conferences. These include physical as well as verbal behaviors.

FOR PARENTS	FOR TEACHERS
Physical Behaviors	
1. Sit in the middle of the group-not at the end of the line.	1. Sit next to the parent.
2. Sit in a relaxed posture.	2. Model a relaxed posture.
3. Attempt to have a relaxed facial expression.	3. Smile at the parent.
4. Look directly at those talking to you.	4. Look at the parent and include them as you are talking to other professionals.
5. Avoid excessive or unrelated hand and body movements.	5. Touch the parent in a comforting way.
6. Avoid nervous laughing and joking. However, humor may help you get your point across and/or reduce a tense situation.	6. Support a parent, when feasible.
Verbal Behaviors	
1. Present your comments in a simple and positive manner.	1. Restate in a simple and positive manner statements made by the parent, checking the intent of the message.
2. Be firm by repeating your comments.	2. Repeat your views in a calm manner.
3. Speak in a tone that can be heard by all members.	3. Ask the parent to speak so that other members can hear the comments.
4. Provide the facts or reasons but do not give long-winded explanations, excuses or apologetic behavior.	4. Outline your verbal descriptions-i.e., "there are three factors, first. . .
5. Avoid stammering, whining, pleading.	5. Tell the parent about a right they have so they do not feel they must plead.

Pointers for Parents

More generally there are other ways that you can work with your child's school so that your child can get the education that is best for him.

1. You can ask your child's teacher to have a conference with you, just as she or the principal can ask you to attend a conference about your child. The conference should be at a time and place that is convenient for all of you.

2. Prepare yourself in advance for the conference. Ask your child how he feels, look over his school work. Write down your questions so you won't forget them. Practice saying what you want to say. If you think the school is planning to move your child to a different class ask the principal if you can visit the other classroom or special programs to see if you think your child belongs there.

3. Two heads are better than one: bring along your husband or wife or a friend to any meeting or conference you attend regarding your child. Your friend can help you decide what was actually said by the group and help you get your own feelings across.

4. Keep a file of all papers and letters regarding your child--all letters you receive from the school and all letters you send to the school.

5. Ask to see your child's school records--the teacher or the principal can explain them to you.

6. If you are confused by what the teacher, the psychologist, or anyone at the conference is saying, ask them to explain so that you can understand.

7. If someone asks you questions about your home life, he should explain why this information is needed. Answer only those questions you feel are appropriate.

8. It is important to find out from the teacher what strengths and assets he or she sees in your child as well as what weaknesses and deficits may need attention. You too should write down your child's strengths and good points, as well as the things you are concerned about. This will help your child find activities in which he can feel successful.

9. At the end of the conference, make sure that:

   a) the teacher has told you what she promises to do to help your child in school;

   b) you have told the teacher what you promise to do to help at home.

   c) you have set up another appointment to see how your child has progressed.

10. Be sure to follow through with any plan you and the teacher have agreed on. Write a checklist for yourself during the conference or schedule important dates on a calendar.

11. Remember, you have a right to speak up if you do not feel the recommended plan or special program is a good one for your child. Ask for another conference to review the situation.

12. If your child is handicapped or has a learning problem, join a parents' organization which is interested in helping families of children like yours. Ask your child's teacher or doctor to give you a list of such organizations. Parents' groups have long worked for children's rights to a good education - work with them - help them to help your child.

13. Meet with other parents on an informal basis. They have faced many of the same problems you have, and may be able to help you.

14. Be involved with the school and its personnel on an informal basis so that they are acquainted with a person, a helpful human being - not only a person standing up for one's rights. It is important to maintain a good social relationship between the individuals involved in your child's school life.

Conclusion

Assertive training for parents of exceptional children can prepare parents for interactions with school personnel during conferences.

Assertive training is the facilitation of a set of skills improving an individual's appropriate expression of feelings, maintenance of rights and meeting of needs.

Behaviorally, parents need to learn to listen, accept, and/or refuse ideas of professionals, deny unreasonable requests, accept and provide positive statements, express their opinions, and ask for specific options during school conferences.

Skills in these areas will reduce anxiety, increase positive feelings and provide a better framework for parents working with school personnel.

Assertive training for parents of handicapped children will facilitate more open honest communication during school conferences. Parents have rights and such training will assist them in attaining and maintaining these rights and the intent of recent legislation. Assertive training is not a panacea, but a step, an additional skill, in the parent's repertoire. The goal is a team approach and solutions to difficult problems, changing times, and low budgets. The more dissention there is between parents and school personnel or between various professionals, the less time and energy there is for effective programming and following up.

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